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## Love and Duty

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# Love and Duty\*

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...love as an inclination cannot be commanded; but beneficence from duty, when no inclination impels us and even when a natural and unconquerable aversion opposes such beneficence, is practical, and not pathological, love. Such love resides in the will and not in the propensities of feeling, in principles of action and not in tender sympathy; and only this practical love can be commanded.<sup>1</sup>

— Immanuel Kant

The thesis of this paper is that there is an important asymmetry between a duty to love and a duty to not love: there is no duty to love as a fitting response to someone's very good qualities, but there is a duty to not love as a fitting response to someone's very bad qualities.<sup>2</sup> I will be working with a fairly standard view of what love is: it is an emotion or attitude experienced by persons in a relationship that involves a *central commitment* – the one who loves is concerned for the wellbeing of the loved one for her own sake.<sup>3</sup> This central commitment is necessary for love, but not sufficient. Further, this commitment is taken to dispose the agent towards

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\* An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Philosophy Department at SUNY-Brockport in October 2013. I thank the members of the audience for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. James Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the duty to love issue investigated in this paper has a narrow focus. There may be duties to love for other reasons – perhaps parents have duties to love their children, for example, since that is crucial to the child's well-being. For this sort of duty to love issue, see Matthew Liao, "The Right of Children to be Loved," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14 (2006), 420-440.

<sup>3</sup> Most accounts of love view this as a central component. See Kolodny, Abramson and Leite; also, on Iris Murdoch's view love is a counter to egoism.

actions and other attitudes that relate to the well-being of the loved one. One important feature of this emotional commitment is to make the person who loves vulnerable in a certain way. Though Francis Bacon wanted to make a point about how greatness was encouraged by lack of attachment, there was some truth to his claim that a person with a spouse and children (a person who loves) “...hath given hostages to fortune...” since the wellbeing of the one who loves is deeply connected to the wellbeing of those she loves. The source of the asymmetry that I discuss is the two part understanding of love: the emotional part and the evaluative commitment part. One cannot directly, or “at will,” control an emotional response, but one can undermine any commitment one would normally have under the circumstances. Thus, the feeling of love is not a duty, though being disposed to act a certain way with respect to the person one has the feelings for *is* controllable. This two part understanding helps us to get a grip on how someone can ‘love’ and despise another at the same time.

In the above passage Kant is generally taken to be, in part, making the point that love, as a feeling and form of emotional attachment to another person, is not something that can be commanded – not something that is subject to moral evaluation. This is because it is not under our control. By contrast, practical love – a kind of beneficence from duty, not marked by “tender sympathy” – can be commanded. But practical love does not mark special relationships with others. We owe such regard to all rational beings. That there is a duty to love anyone, at least with romantic relationships and some familial relationships thus seems controversial, and indeed, positing such a duty might at first seem like a good reason for rejecting, ironically, a popular Kantian view of love.<sup>4</sup> On Kantian views advocated by writers such as David Velleman, a duty to love seems to follow almost trivially from the commitments of Kant’s theory: if the core of love is “...appreciation of someone’s value as a person...” and since we all have value as persons, we all ought to love each other.<sup>5</sup> This is

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<sup>4</sup> The exception to this seems to be relationships between parent and child, in which some believe the parent has a duty to love their child (and not simply to act as though they love their child). I will discuss this more at the end of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> This quote is from David Velleman “Beyond Price,” *Ethics*, 118 (January 2008), 199.

a problem for the Kantian view since one core feature of love runs counter to this – that is the feature that calls for special consideration for those we love, and such consideration cannot be justified on the grounds that the person we love has special value. Of course, Velleman is well aware of this worry about the Kantian account he develops, noting that love isn't just *any* appreciation of someone's value as a person, but, additionally, "...is an appreciative response to the perception of that value."<sup>6</sup> Presumably, those we do not love are perceived to have value as persons as well, it is just that our response to their value is not "appreciative." Since there is no duty to appreciate another's value as a person in the relevant sense, even on this view there is no duty to love.

Other writers use the control intuition to motivate a rather different view of the reasons of love. So, for example, some would hold that there is no duty to love because we cannot control our emotional responses, and without the ability to control we can't have reasons to love that would underlie a duty or obligation to love. The appeal here is to some version of the 'ought' implies 'can' principle. Nevertheless, S. Matthew Liao has argued that this line of argument won't work since we do exert some control over our emotions. We can't always do so, granted – but there are techniques that people employ to generate emotional responses, such as when a boxer might try to make himself angry before a fight.<sup>7</sup>

However, another view of love would also hold that there is no duty to love because love, by its very nature, is not something one can have reasons for. That is the No Reasons View, articulated by writers such as Harry Frankfurt and Aaron Smuts.<sup>8</sup> On this view, love is just something that is *impossible* to justify by reasons since there is nothing more fundamental to appeal to in providing that justification. For example, Irving Singer has argued that love *bestows* value on the loved one, and is not based upon an appraisal of the loved one, or a response to the value of a loved one. Since it is not based upon value, or a response to value, there are no

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> S. Matthew Liao, "The Idea of a Duty to Love," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 40 (2006), 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Aaron Smuts, "In Defense of the No-Reasons View of Love," (unpublished manuscript).

*justifying* reasons for love, though of course one can provide a causal explanation for why particular individuals happen to fall in love, and thus causal reasons. There may be the appearance of a false dichotomy here. One might argue that love can involve both a response to value and a bestowal of value. There is intuitively some truth to this, though, strictly, a no reasons view would hold that the response to value is not a necessary feature of love. One person might fall in love with another person, stay in love, and find any explanation of that love *utterly lacking*, and that's perfectly fine. This may not be the typical case, but it can certainly occur. On one of the contrasting views, people may certainly fall in love mysteriously, but once they are *in love*, there are reasons for love grounded, for example, in the relationship itself.<sup>9</sup>

In any case, it seems to me that the Bestowal View and a pure version of the No Reasons View should be separated. We can distinguish them in the following way: The Bestowal View denies that reasons for love exist independently of the attitude of the person in love; thus, they deny the pure appreciation view that holds that when one is in love, that love is justified in virtue of an appreciation of the qualities (for example) of the loved one. The Pure No Reasons View denies not only that reasons of love exist independently of the attitudes of the person in love, but also denies that there are any kind of reasons *at all* for love. On this view, that an agent loves another does not bestow value, either. This might be a kind of love nihilism: it does not deny that people feel love for each other, but denies that there are any justifying reasons *at all* for it. Those who adopt a No Reasons View are not pure in this sense: they do think that there are reasons, but those reasons are understood purely subjectively. On a sophisticated version of the

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<sup>9</sup> See Niko Kolodny's "Love as a Valuing Relationship," *The Philosophical Review* 114 (April 2003), 135-189. Kolodny is arguing against both the no reasons view and the quality view, in favor of the view that what provides reasons for love are the relationships themselves. On the view that I am arguing for here, it may well be that the reasons for love are to be found in the relationships themselves; however, reasons against love can be found in the qualities of the person one loves. As I will argue, this is not incompatible with the Relationship View, since it is the qualities that indicate violations of relationship defining demands or requirements that underwrite the duty to not love.

view, love is characterized by my desire for the wellbeing of another, and by my endorsement of that desire that is cashed out in terms of higher order desires (for example, to maintain the relationship).

On Bestowal View there is no duty to love. Aaron Smuts quotes Helena from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to illustrate:

How happy some o'er other some can be!  
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.  
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so.  
He will not know what all but he do know.  
And, as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,  
So I, admiring of his qualities.

There is some intuitive pull to this idea. It explains why those in love attach such value to the ones they love, even in recognition that from the impartial perspective, the one they love has no qualities that are truly more special than others. However, this example is not one that critics of the view would find threatening. That emotional engagement adds to aesthetic appreciation is commonplace. The sorts of qualities that the quality theorist will identify as the fitting basis for love will be things like the loved one's character traits, deeper qualities of personality.<sup>10</sup>

There is another odd feature of the No Reasons View. We have reasons to hate and sustain hate. Some hate is warranted and some isn't. Advocates of the No Reasons View can simply hold that hate is just unlike love in this respect – that one needs reasons to justify hatred, even though one doesn't need them, and, indeed, they don't exist, in the case of love. But a view that preserves a connection in terms of justification is to be preferred, and on the view that I propose we can make a similar observation about hate: there is no duty to hate, but there can be a duty to not hate.

The part of my thesis that is probably less controversial, intuitively, perhaps, is the idea that there is a duty to *not* love someone as a fitting response to that person's bad qualities. However, the duty to not love is problematic for many of the same reasons as a duty to love. On the no-reasons view love is simply not something subject to any sort of justification. Frankfurt, for example, holds that love involves first order desires for certain

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<sup>10</sup> See Kate Abramson and Adam Leite, "Love as a Reactive Emotion," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 62 (October 2011), 673-699.

states, such as the loved one's wellbeing, and second-order attitudes or, what Frankfurt calls 'volitions' that bear on how the agent "...is disposed to manage the motivations and interests by which he is moved..."

We can distinguish a duty to not fall in love from a duty to not stay in love. Against this view, very many writers on love have pointed out that it seems that we can have reasons to abandon love – that it makes perfect sense to say things like "He ought not love her." Someone in an abusive relationship may have overwhelming reason to abandon the relationship and to cease loving the person they have the relationship with. *Even if* the feelings are not eliminated by the abuse, the abuse constitutes a compelling reason not to love. Possibly this case is special, since abuse represents a violation of the relationship itself, as well as a broader cruelty. But a similar point can be made when the harm is outside of the relationship, as when one finds out the person one loves is a compassionless murderer. In *The Third Man* Anna discovers the man she loves, Harry Lime, has been responsible for the deaths and serious illnesses of children who were treated with diluted black-market penicillin that he provided. Yet she continues to love him, and more, she continues to believe that her love is unproblematic as love. On the no-reasons view it is easy to account for the permissibility of falling out of love with Harry Lime – indeed, on this view, both love and failure to love are equally permissible and equally unsupported by any reasons. The no-reasons advocate will argue that the attitude is permissible still, but what is not permissible might be things such as acting on the attitude. Perhaps it is simply Anna's *displays* of love that are problematic, her attempts to help Harry avoid justice, not the love itself.

However, one might hold that even though it is true that Anna has reason to not love Harry Lime once she discovers he is a murderer, it is still the case that since love is nonvoluntary, she should not be blamed if she continues to love Lime.<sup>11</sup> If it is true that she should not be blamed, then she has no duty to not love him. All that reasons for love can give us is a mode of criticism that focuses on whether or not the emotion is fitting to its object. If Anna loves Harry because she believes he is a warm humanitarian, then the emotion is not appropriate, since it is based

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<sup>11</sup> Kolodny, 138.

upon a false belief – just as fear is not appropriate in circumstances in which one is not faced with a genuinely dangerous situation. Thus, if Anna loves Harry because she believes he is a warm humanitarian when he is not, then she has no reason to love him, just as someone who fears a dog thinking it is dangerous, when it is not, has no reason to fear the dog. If this sounds odd, the view can be slightly amended so that fittingness is tied to reasonable or justified belief, but the general point would still hold.

There at least two routes we can take in challenging this argument. On one route we can argue that even though she is not blameworthy for loving Lime, she still has a duty to not love him. Another route, the one I pursue here, is to argue that blame is still warranted in such cases because love reveals one's evaluative commitments in a way that reveals something about a person's dispositions and character. The duty to not love does not involve a duty to eradicate one's feelings for someone, but will involve a duty to try to eradicate those feelings, and subvert any dispositions that come along with those feelings – dispositions to seek the well-being of the loved one when that conflicts with justice, and dispositions to make excuses, and ignore the evidence.

Alternative theories of the reasons of love will hold that it is perfectly reasonable for Anna to fall out of love with Harry once she finds out he is a murderer. It is particularly easy for the Quality theory to account for this in that the Quality theorist can hold that Anna discovers that Harry lacks the features of character she thought he had, and thus her love, at the outset, was unfitting in some respect and when she is in a position to recognize this it is quite reasonable for her to fall out of love with him. Of course, on this view it may also be reasonable for her to continue to love him even upon discovering he is a murderer, since there may be *other* qualities she is responding to that have not changed (his sense of humor, etc.). On the Relationship theory we also have an account of why it would be reasonable for Anna to fall out of love with Harry: there are certain *relationship defining demands* that Harry has failed to live up to. One might argue that this is mistaken, though, since Harry's killing is not something that figures into his relationship with Anna. We can understand relationship defining demands in at least two ways. First, we could opt for a completely subjective account of such demands, holding that the content of such demands, which place constraints on acceptable behavior in a relationship, is something which is determined by Anna's psychology – for example, what she expects, reasonably or not,



from Harry. On this view of such demands, whether Harry has violated them depends on whether or not he has violated what Anna takes them to be. She is the final arbiter. Note, though, that Harry could then have his own set of independent relationship defining demands. On the subjective view, of course, there may be no overlap at all.

However, we could have amore objective view in which there are at least some relationship defining demands that obtain independently of what the person's in those relationships believe, desire, etc. This more objective approach conforms better to intuitions regarding Anna. She may feel love for Lime, and in the short term this may not be controllable, but she *can* still engage in action that blocks or counteracts her emotions.

One might not endorse one's own desires at all, for example – and that is something we have control over. Take a slightly different version of Anna, someone who finds herself still in the grip of her emotional attachment to Harry Lime and yet who realizes she should not love him, that he is the sort of person who deserves to not have her consideration. On a sophisticated Bestowal View this might not count as 'real' love since she is not endorsing her emotional attachment to Lime. However, the Bestowal View will have a problem with the idea that in the case of second Anna – the Anna who wishes she did not have the feelings she does for Harry Lime, *that* Anna is right, and the other Anna, who endorses those feelings, is wrong. On the Bestowal View it is the attitudes independently of what they pick up on that matter in the bestowal of value. And this does seem strongly counterintuitive – in the way that purely subjective accounts of reasons, in general, are.

In the actual version of *The Third Man*, Anna's love for Harry reveals that something in Velleman's account should at least be qualified. Velleman holds that love "...arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from another person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him. Love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other."<sup>12</sup> However, love can also render us prone to a different sort of self-protection that leads to either self-deception

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<sup>12</sup> David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion," *Ethics*, 109 (January 1999), 361.

or a kind of emotional dogmatism that some view central to ‘true’ love. This is the ‘love is blind’ trope.

What can account for the asymmetry in these intuitions? Why is there no duty to love out of a recognition of a person’s good qualities, but in some cases a duty to not love in recognition of their bad qualities? I think we can appeal to the Relationship View and subsume some of the intuitions that support the quality view into the Relationship View. On the Relationship View, reasons for love kick in once the relationship is established. This is compatible with it being the case that there are no reasons to fall in love and *establish* the relationship in the first place. What of relationships, like the parent/child relationship in which one might take the relationship itself as just a given, something that is established simply in virtue of the mere existence of a parent and child? Even in these cases, there is no duty to love, though there very may well be a duty to act as though one loves. This is because what goes into a relationship of the relevant sort is more than the bare biological relationship.

However, though there is no duty to love in recognition of the good, a recognition of the bad features of a person ought in some cases to preclude entering into a relationship with that person, and, once in a relationship, to abandon it. But then we have another oddity: why to bad qualities preclude and yet good qualities fail to require? Prior to entering into a relationship with another, the fact that someone has good qualities does nothing to distinguish that person from very many others. The selectivity of love requires grounding in a relationship. However, when a person has bad qualities, and if those bad qualities are such that they serve to violate relationship defining demands, there can be a duty to not love, depending on the severity of those violations. Note that this is in addition to yet further claims one might make about what love or lack of love can reveal: a child may have not duty to love a parent (as opposed to a duty to feel gratitude), but failure to love under some circumstances can reveal something very bad about a person’s character that may still warrant negative evaluation.